

Co-op Chat: The Importance of Good Public Relations

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
RURAL ELECTRIFICATION ADMINISTRATION
WASHINGTON 25, D. C.

April 15, 1949

To All REA Co-op Officials:

Some management experts say that no business can be considered well managed unless its management devotes at least as much attention to the building and maintaining of good public relations as to internal business management.

Building and maintaining good public relations is as important for an electric co-op as for any other kind of business. In fact, it seems to me even more important because the co-op enjoys Federal loan financing under the national REA program and therefore has a special obligation to cultivate good public relations. To whatever extent any REA co-op forfeits good will, it hurts not only itself but also its neighbor co-ops and the entire nation-wide co-op rural electrification program of which it is a part.

On the other hand an REA co-op has basically a much easier job than many other kinds of business in gaining community acceptance and support. This is because the co-op is clearly a community service enterprise and has no other purpose than to help rural people and communities improve their living standards through supplying electric power to them on a non-profit basis. But that fact does not relieve the co-op board and manager of their obligation to build good will for the co-op.

The building of good public relations is as much a matter of attitude as of planned activities. This is brought home to me quite sharply every once in a while when letters of complaint show up on my desk from people in different parts of the country, and now and then from Members of Congress, about the lack of courtesy or lack of cooperation on the part of some REA co-op official.

I realize that a harassed co-op official may often begrudge the time it takes to explain to an impatient applicant why he may have to wait a little longer to get service. And I can well understand the occasional temptation to forget that "a soft answer turneth away wrath." But yielding to such temptation will certainly not create good will toward the co-op he represents. And neither does it help the REA program as a whole if Members of Congress receive and refer to me letters from their constituents complaining of arbitrary or uncivil treatment by a co-op official. Fortunately, such cases are not frequent.

Thanks to the devoted and untiring efforts that you co-op leaders throughout the Nation have contributed to this program, it stands uniquely high in public esteem and enjoys broad bi-partisan support in the Congress. This is as it should be, since it is quite clearly a non-partisan program for the benefit of rural people regardless of their political affiliation.

I am aware that the co-op officials are selected by the members and are directly responsible to them and not to this Agency. However, when the co-op principle of neutrality in politics is violated, it usually creates dissension in the ranks of the co-op membership and may result in the alienation of bi-partisan public support for the program. Fortunately again, most REA co-op leaders have been aware of these dangers and have therefore been careful to keep their personal political partisanship out of co-op affairs. And I am confident that the few who have been less careful in this respect will agree, on thinking the matter over, that partisan politics has no place in their electric co-op.

The directors and the manager have a special obligation, as co-op leaders and officials, to promote good will for the co-op and for the nation-wide movement of which the co-op is a part. This means taking an active part in civic affairs and helping the community understand and appreciate the co-op's contribution to community welfare and prosperity. But, as I said before, it also means being fair, courteous and prompt in all official contacts, whether in person or by mail, with co-op members, prospective members, public officials and members of legislative bodies, or any other persons.

Keeping the co-op members informed about their co-op, the value of their co-op membership, the co-op's progress, problems and plans has often been pointed out as the best means of building strong member support for the co-op. But a well-informed, loyal membership is also the co-op's greatest asset in its task of building and maintaining good community relations. The co-op can have no better ambassadors of good will than those of its own members who know their co-op, are active in it and take pride in the job the co-op is doing for their community.

Sincerely,

Claude R. Wickard

Administrator

